

Great Ming 1231

Chapter 1231 This Is Actually a BookstoreZhoushan Island, Dinghai Harbor.

Xiao Hei No.1 slowly sailed into the military dock and came to a stop.

It had returned to replenish ammunition and fuel.

Steamships were formidable in battle, but they burned coal quickly and had to return to port frequently for resupply. In this regard, they could not compare to wooden sailing ships. As long as there was food on board, a sail-driven vessel could drift at sea for a year or more.

Yao Xingjuan grabbed E'zhe by the collar and hauled him off the ship, giving him a light shove forward.

The two special service guards who had long been waiting at the dock rushed up immediately, one on each side, eyes fixed on E'zhe.

Over the past few days, E'zhe had "gone missing," and the incident had nearly scared them out of their wits. In name, they were his protectors; in truth, they also bore the responsibility of monitoring him. Losing the Mongol Khan would affect Gaocun's long-term plans.

They had almost cried from fear.

Now that he was back, they finally breathed a sigh of relief—but their eyes refused to leave him.

E'zhe scratched his head awkwardly. "Sorry. I just wanted to get on the ship and have some fun."

The Water-Combat Specialized Tianzun walked over from the side and gave him a light kick on the backside.

"You're only ten years old. If you want to play, at least choose something normal. Boarding a pirate ship for fun? Do you have a death wish? If you had spent that time studying at the Naval Academy instead, it would have benefited your future far more."

E'zhe immediately behaved, listening obediently. He didn't dare act mischievous in front of Tianzun.

At that moment, two sailors carried down a large basket from the ship and waved from afar.

"Tianzun! Tianzun! We found some rare, delicious fruit!"

Delicious?

The moment he heard that word, Li Dao Xuan's head snapped around.

"Sugar apples! And top-grade large ones at that!" Li Dao Xuan was overjoyed.

Heroes fall for beauty; Tianzun falls for good food.

At the sight of something tasty, he dashed forward in a single stride, grabbed one from the basket, split it open skillfully, and scooped out the flesh.

Delicious!

He was a native of Chongqing. In the past, if he wanted to eat sugar apples, he could only order them online.

As for modern fruit—everyone understood the situation. To survive the long logistics chain, farmers and merchants had to pick fruit while it was still unripe.

Sorting, loading, transporting—ten days or half a month later, it would finally reach the city, still not fully ripe.

Retailers would then artificially ripen it before selling it to consumers. Naturally, the flavor suffered greatly.

For modern city dwellers, tasting fruit that had ripened naturally on the tree was almost like chasing a dream.

Now, eating a naturally ripened sugar apple, Li Dao Xuan felt utterly satisfied.

Yao Xingjuan, E'zhe, and the others gathered together and whispered quietly.

"As expected, the ancients were right to place tasty food on the offering table. Immortals really do love to eat."

The war correspondent who had sailed with them did not join their whispering. She stepped forward, bowed deeply to Li Dao Xuan, and said:

"Master, we have established basic trust with several indigenous villages on Yizhou Island. They no longer regard us as enemies, but welcome our arrival."

Li Dao Xuan smiled. "Very good. There's no need to rush. The more anxious we are to bring them into our embrace, the more likely we are to resort to forceful methods. And then we would become no different from Western marauders."

The correspondent asked, "What should we do next?"

While chewing the fruit, Li Dao Xuan replied with a smile, "Mountain-and-Sea Economy."

"Mountain-and-Sea Economy?"

He nodded. "Yizhou is not just an island. It is surrounded by the sea and also filled with mountains. That makes it an ideal place to develop both mountain and maritime industries. We can guide them to cultivate agricultural products in the mountains and harvest seafood from the sea. In exchange, we provide necessities such as grain and cloth for their mountain goods and sea goods."

"Trade," he continued, "is the fastest way to build channels of communication."

"Through trade, we export our culture while also absorbing theirs. Gradually, cultural integration forms, then ethnic integration. As they understand us more, and we understand them more, barriers will disappear. Eventually, there will be no distinction between us and them."

The correspondent suddenly understood. "This is the same method used with the ethnic minorities in Sichuan."

"Exactly!" Li Dao Xuan said with a smile. "For all our compatriots, we must adopt this approach. Under no circumstances should we use military conquest, slaughter, or intimidation. Otherwise, we would become the very people we despise."

The correspondent glanced at Yao Xingjuan and lowered her voice. "He can't handle that kind of work, can he?"

Li Dao Xuan spread his hands. "No, he's not suited for it. But that's not a problem. The Central Plains have already been pacified. Soon, our manpower will be greatly freed up. At that time, we can dispatch many talented administrators here. Before the main force arrives, let Yao Xingjuan continue making small disturbances."

In truth, Li Dao Xuan was also teaching his disciple. Everyone in the News Department was his "Tianzun student." Once she understood, she would incorporate these ideas into her reporting and broadcast them through the "television," allowing everyone to hear them.

Before long, Xiao Hei No.1 had completed its resupply. Coal, gunpowder, shells, food, fresh water—all fully loaded once again, ready to set sail.

E'zhe looked longingly at the ship, clearly hoping to sneak aboard once more.

But this time was impossible.

Yao Xingjuan, the two special service guards, and even Tianzun himself were staring at him.

The little boy finally did not dare act recklessly again and obediently remained ashore.

Yao Xingjuan bowed deeply to Li Dao Xuan. "Tianzun, I shall depart once more."

Li Dao Xuan nodded. "After using the steam paddle ship for some time, what are your impressions?"

Yao Xingjuan quickly replied, "Our ship is excellent in every way, except that it needs constant coal resupply. It must operate centered around supply ports and cannot travel too far."

Li Dao Xuan nodded. "In fact, even sailing ships must constantly replenish food and water. The Westerners took over a hundred years of continuous expansion—establishing supply ports and gradually extending their operational radius—before they could appear here. In this regard, we still have a long road ahead. Work hard."

Yao Xingjuan seemed to understand something. "I will do my utmost."

He turned and boarded the ship, calling out orders as he did so.

"This voyage, keep your eyes sharp. While harassing the Dutch, also search for places suitable for building supply ports. Our destination is the entire ocean of the world. We must not be satisfied with just this stretch of sea."

The young sea raiders roared in unison.

"Arrr!"

Chapter 1232 Paper Strategy

Hong Chengchou, Governor-General of the Three Borders, had finished packing his luggage.

He was heading to the capital to assume the post of Minister of War.

The court was a dangerous place. Far less comfortable than ruling the frontier like a local emperor. He knew very well that once he stepped into the capital, every word would need to be weighed, every expression measured. From now on, he would live carefully, cautiously, as though walking on thin ice.

He could not help feeling a little sentimental.

In recent years, the territories under his jurisdiction, Ningxia, Yinchuan, Yanbian, had been slowly growing prosperous. For reasons he could not quite explain, the Mongols had stopped riding south to burn and plunder. Instead, they had developed a surprising enthusiasm for trade with the Han people.

Several horse markets had sprung up beside the northern border forts. The Mongols brought fine horses and exchanged them for Han goods. Everyone smiled. Men who once hacked at each other until their blades turned red now chatted over prices as if they were distant cousins reunited at New Year.

Hong Chengchou found it all rather baffling.

He had not orchestrated this transformation. In fact, he had barely intervened. And yet somehow, things had simply... turned out this way.

Even more striking, large numbers of Han border settlers had begun raising sheep, cattle, and horses.

In the past, they had not dared. The moment the Mongols rode in, livestock vanished like snow in spring. But now that the northern threat had eased, animal husbandry became simple. The vast grasslands were natural feed. One only had to let the animals graze and wait for wealth to fatten alongside them.

With time, the border folk grew richer. Even the frontier troops could supply much of their own grain, no longer relying so heavily on the interior provinces.

The situation was flourishing. Rising like steam from a freshly opened pot.

And now, just as things were thriving, he had to leave.

It was difficult not to feel reluctant.

Lost in these thoughts, his carriage departed Ningxia and rolled south along the official road toward Yan'an. Before long, a long merchant caravan approached from the opposite direction, carts and horses stretched out in a winding line, loaded with salt, iron, tea, and other goods beloved by the frontier people.

Such caravans were common now. They brought necessities north and carried back wool, sheepskins, ox horns, and other local products. Each side took what it needed. Mutual benefit. Mutual satisfaction.

Hong Chengchou ordered his attendants to halt the caravan.

"Where do you come from?"

The merchants, seeing that it was a high frontier official blocking their path, did not dare show the slightest negligence.

"Reporting to Your Excellency, we come from Hanzhong Prefecture."

"Hanzhong?" Hong Chengchou blinked. "You travel quite far. I assumed you were from Yan'an."

The merchants grinned.

"In the past, yes, it would have been far. But now Hanzhong is not so distant. From Hanzhong to Yan'an, one can take the big train. It goes whooo and arrives before you know it. Only the stretch from Yan'an to Yinchuan is a bit troublesome."

The big train.

Hong Chengchou knew the term train. Several years ago, he had passed through the strange place called Gao Family Village, attended a bizarre hot pot festival hosted in the name of Dao Xuan Tianzun, and even ridden what they called a small train. The memory still left him mentally disheveled.

And now there was a big train?

He nodded slowly.

"In the past, the ones who came here to purchase wool were from a workshop called Warm Enough to Make You Sleepy. Why are Hanzhong merchants entering this trade as well?"

The Hanzhong merchants laughed heartily.

"Why let others make all the profit? We can knit woolen sweaters too. Hanzhong has opened a woolen factory of our own. The brand is called Auspicious Fortune. Our sweaters sell cheaper than Warm Enough to Make You Sleepy, so business is quite good. The common folk are pleased. If they cannot afford the expensive brand, they can still afford ours."

Hong Chengchou felt a stir in his heart.

Shaanxi commerce had developed to such a degree? During his years guarding the frontier, the interior had clearly changed more than he realized.

After parting with the merchants, he continued toward Yan'an.

Along the way, he encountered several more caravans. Goods of every strange variety headed north toward Yinchuan. He also passed horse traders driving magnificent Mongolian steeds southward toward Yan'an.

In his eyes, those were not merely horses.

They were cavalry.

With so many fine warhorses entering the passes, the cavalry strength of the Great Ming would surely rise to a new level.

The thought brought him genuine comfort.

After days of travel, Yan'an Prefecture finally came into view.

The moment he spotted the city walls, Hong Chengchou straightened in his carriage and began adjusting his appearance. He could not let the Yan'an Prefect see him looking road-worn and dusty.

He took out a small comb, dipped it in water, and carefully smoothed his hair until it sat just right. He brushed dust from his robes, patting himself clean until he looked positively radiant and upright. Only then did he step down from the carriage.

The Yan'an Prefect hurried forward.

"Welcome, Governor-General... ah, no, Minister Hong."

Though he had been promoted from Governor-General of the Three Borders to Minister of War, Hong Chengchou did not feel particularly elated. To accompany the sovereign was to accompany a tiger. Distance from the throne had its advantages.

He inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment, then let his gaze drift beyond the city gate.

Outside the walls, a bustling outer district had risen, modeled after Xi'an. Commerce had grown so lively in recent years that shops and market sheds now sprawled outside the gate in neat clusters.

Because it lay beyond the walls, this area was well suited to agricultural trade. Aside from the early days when Dao Xuan Tianzun had dropped a few mischievous "immortal artifacts" here, the place had since become primarily a vegetable market.

Hong Chengchou swept his eyes across the stalls.

Flour. Rice. Fresh vegetables. Potatoes. Corn.

The abundance alone was enough to astonish even a man of his rank.

"Yan'an has become this wealthy?" he sighed. "When this official once served as Governor of Yansui, a dou of rice cost a thousand coins. The people were so poor they sold their children. After I left to take up the Three Borders post, I did not return for years. I never imagined such transformation."

The Prefect smiled.

"It is all thanks to Dao Xuan Tianzun. He captured the Dragon King and forced him to bring rain. He bestowed chemical fertilizer upon us and taught the people how to use it. Prosperity followed."

Hong Chengchou stared at him.

The Prefect seemed to realize that further explanation might only deepen the confusion and tactfully changed the subject.

"Minister Hong, would you care to visit the most famous new establishment in Yan'an? The New Village Bookstore."

"A bookstore?" Hong Chengchou raised a brow. "What is so remarkable about selling books?"

The Prefect hesitated, then laughed.

"The New Village Bookstore is unlike ordinary bookshops. It has become something of a... well, it is difficult to describe. You must see it yourself."

Since the Prefect spoke so mysteriously, how could Hong Chengchou refuse?

Under his guidance, the entourage soon arrived before the most renowned establishment in Yan'an.

Hong Chengchou looked up at the building and nearly recoiled in shock.

It covered an enormous area. Wide and sprawling. Larger than the grand mansions of wealthy landlords. From the outside alone, one could see multiple courtyards, layers upon layers of structures, countless rooms hidden within.

He stared.

"This is a bookstore? An uninformed passerby would think it the residence of a grand chancellor."

Chapter 1233 Startled at Every Turn

The Yan'an Prefect introduced proudly, "The New Village Bookstore is no longer merely a bookstore. It has become a place where people of all trades and walks of life gather to exchange ideas."

Hong Chengchou did not fully grasp what that meant, but since he was already at the entrance, he decided to see for himself.

He stepped inside.

The moment he entered the first courtyard, a strange odor hit his nose.

It smelled suspiciously like manure.

In a bookstore?

His brows knit in displeasure. Following the scent, he turned his head and saw a cluster of scholars gathered around a flower bed, engaged in heated discussion.

One scholar was shaking his head with theatrical confidence.

"See? I told you. Chemical fertilizer works better than manure. You would not believe me, and now the evidence is right here. The crops treated with manure grow decently enough. But look at the ones treated with chemical fertilizer. The growth is far more vigorous. This, gentlemen, is called science."

As he spoke, he flipped open a book and riffled through it.

"The book explains that what crops require is complex. Soil acidity and alkalinity, iron and sulfur content in fertilizer, all kinds of chemical elements must align properly. If you simply splash manure without understanding its composition, how can that be scientific? I, on the other hand, measure my fertilizer to the jin and liang. How could I possibly lose to you?"

The opposing scholar looked miserable.

"This humble one comes from a poor farming family. For generations we used manure. Who would have thought I would suffer such a defeat here today? Very well. From now on, I shall obediently learn to use chemical fertilizer."

The surrounding scholars burst into laughter.

"Ha! That is what you get for doubting the Heavenly Book. It is only because Dao Xuan Tianzun is magnanimous that you are not charged with blasphemy."

Before their teasing could settle, the bookstore owner, Gao Shan, popped out from nowhere.

"That is incorrect," he said with a grin. "Dao Xuan Tianzun fully supports questioning the Heavenly Book and verifying it through experiment. It is absolutely not considered blasphemy. Anyone may doubt the book from any angle. If you can prove it wrong with evidence, Tianzun will even grant you a grand prize."

The scholars laughed.

"Tianzun is benevolent!"

Hong Chengchou felt a flicker of surprise. He stepped forward and addressed the scholar holding the book.

"Brother, may this official borrow that volume for a moment?"

"Of course."

The scholar handed it over.

Hong Chengchou examined the cover.

"Methods and Techniques for Using Chemical Fertilizer."

He did not quite understand the title at first glance, but as he flipped through it, the contents became clear. It was a manual teaching farmers how to fertilize crops. Numerous crops were illustrated within, each accompanied by detailed instructions. Ratios. Seasons. Quantities.

The thoroughness was almost alarming.

It felt as though a hundred veteran farmers were tugging his ears and lecturing him simultaneously on the art of cultivation.

Hong Chengchou had no need to learn such knowledge personally, but he could not help admiring the effort behind it.

"This is a fine book for the benefit of the people. It ought to be widely promoted."

"It already is," the scholar replied. "It costs only ten wen per copy. Practically half a gift."

Hong Chengchou blinked.

"However," the scholar continued, "most common farmers cannot read. Even if they buy it, they cannot understand it. That is the greatest problem. We poor scholars must learn from it first, then return home and teach our parents and elders."

The scholar who had just lost the debate stood up again.

"I must also return and teach my family how to use chemical fertilizer. I should buy a copy."

Hong Chengchou felt as if he himself had learned something merely by witnessing this scene. And he had only just entered the bookstore. What other marvels awaited inside?

He moved into the next courtyard.

There, several scholars were arguing once more.

He leaned closer and heard one say, "It turns out that the Franks we always speak of are actually two different countries. One is called Spain, the other Portugal. I only learned this from reading this book."

Another scholar laughed.

"And those red-haired people we mention are called the Dutch. They are also known as the Coachmen of the Sea. They sail great ships across the world conducting trade. In matters of maritime commerce, we are already far behind Europe. We must be vigilant."

"Brother Zheng, is it not true that your father trades silk along the Silk Road?"

"Yes," the man addressed as Brother Zheng replied. "Our caravans go as far as Persia. Beyond that, we are blind. I never imagined there were so many nations and such complicated politics further west. Remarkable."

As he spoke, he unrolled a massive map onto the table.

"Here is the furthest point our family has reached. But look further west. The lands stretch on and on. I would dearly love to earn every last coin from those people."

The scholars roared with laughter.

"With your Zheng family alone? Impossible. We must all go together."

Hong Chengchou felt another jolt of astonishment.

The Silk Road he did not understand well enough to comment. He moved on.

In the next courtyard, two scholars stood silently before a large sand table.

The model was impressive. Mountains and rivers rendered vividly.

Hong Chengchou glanced at it and instantly recognized the terrain.

Shanghai Pass.

His heart leaped.

One scholar picked up a small figurine and placed it on a mountain outside the pass.

"I set an ambush here. How would you respond?"

The other snorted.

"That depends on what troops you have left. You have few flags remaining. At best, you can deploy infantry here. But my artillery has not yet moved."

He placed a tiny cannon at the foot of the mountain.

"Boom, boom, boom. Your ambush is obliterated."

Hong Chengchou chuckled.

"Paper strategy."

Yet before his smile faded, one of the scholars grabbed a strange model.

It looked vaguely like a carriage, yet not quite. It resembled a square iron box on wheels.

The scholar slapped it down behind a slope.

"You have fallen into my trap. My armored cavalry regiment has been waiting here. The moment your artillery positions are set, my armored cavalry charges from behind the hill and crushes your guns to dust."

Hong Chengchou could not hold back.

He stepped forward sharply.

"Wait. You call that thing armored cavalry? In what way does it resemble cavalry?"

Chapter 1234 Keep Him Here

The two scholars did not panic at the sight of a high official.

In the lands under Dao Xuan Tianzun's influence, common people no longer trembled before officials the way they once had in the old days.

They simply gave a brief salute. One of them replied calmly, "Yes. This is armored cavalry."

Hong Chengchou frowned. "Is this not merely an iron box? In battle, are horses meant to pull it?"

"Of course not." The scholar laughed and pulled a book from behind him, handing it over. "Take a look. New Military Forces. This issue introduces our armored vehicles."

Hong Chengchou's curiosity flared. He opened it.

It was no ordinary book, but a volume packed with military knowledge. One might call it a military journal, though such a term did not yet exist in his vocabulary.

He turned to a page and saw an illustration of the very same large iron vehicle modeled on the table. Only this time it was no model. It was the real machine, drawn in detail, with a man standing beside it to show its size.

Below the image was text:

Light Armored Vehicle Type II, proudly manufactured by Chang'an Automobile Works. Based on Type I, it features enhanced power and reduced armor weight, allowing for greater speed and significantly reduced coal consumption.

With improved tire manufacturing technology, its off-road capability has seen moderate enhancement.

However, it still suffers from insufficient top speed, weak climbing ability, and a tendency to become stuck in complex terrain. Its operational range remains limited.

Hong Chengchou stared.

"Is... is what is written here true?"

He had barely spoken when a loud rumbling echoed from outside the bookstore.

The Yan'an Prefect smiled. "A motor vehicle has come to deliver goods. Minister, would you care to see?"

Hong Chengchou hurried to the entrance.

There, a large freight truck stood parked before the bookstore. Its cargo bed was piled high with books. Workers swiftly unloaded them, stacking bundles neatly before waving to the driver.

"Much appreciated!"

The driver grinned. "Delivery complete. I'm off."

The vehicle rumbled to life, let out a low growl, gathered speed, and disappeared around the street corner.

Hong Chengchou stood frozen.

With his experience, he immediately understood. The iron beast before him was for civilian use, transporting goods. The square iron box model in the sand table, clad in armor, was clearly its martial counterpart.

So it was real.

And divided into civilian and military types.

He had gone to the frontier for a few years as governor, and the interior world had changed this much?

For a fleeting instant, his expression nearly betrayed utter shock. Fortunately, he was a master of composure. He absolutely could not look like a country bumpkin. He swallowed the reaction with heroic restraint.

Turning to the Prefect, he asked evenly, "Are the construction blueprints for that iron vehicle available in this bookstore? This official would like to purchase a copy."

The Prefect smiled. "The full blueprints are not sold. However, the steam engine technology, bearing technology, and related principles are available. Once those are mastered, building such a vehicle is not impossible."

Hong Chengchou's eyes lit up. "Take me there at once."

Soon he stood before a shelf labeled Physics.

An entire wall of books.

Comprehensive Analysis of Steam Engine Technology.

Practical Applications of Steam Engines.

Steam Dynamics.

Hong Chengchou felt as though he had entered a treasure mountain. He grabbed one at random and opened it.

He could not understand a word.

After a long pause, he quietly returned the book to its place.

"It seems," he said with dry dignity, "there is little need to worry about such technology being stolen."

"Indeed," the Prefect replied. "It is not easily stolen. To build such a vehicle requires an entire industrial system. Understanding theory alone is insufficient. One must solve materials science and numerous other difficulties. Many materials rely entirely on gifts bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. With our own capabilities, we could not produce them. At present, there is no need to fear enemy nations copying it."

Hong Chengchou felt as though he was only half following the conversation.

He moved to another shelf.

Here were titles such as Management Studies, How to Speak with People, Workplace Relationships, Success Is No Accident.

He picked up Workplace Relationships and skimmed two pages.

"This is... the art of official intrigue. There is even a book for studying it?"

The Prefect chuckled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun says the author is mostly making things up to fool people. But Tianzun does not interfere. If people enjoy reading it, let the market decide."

Hong Chengchou fell silent.

In the span of a short visit, his mind was already struggling to keep pace. A thin sheen of sweat formed on his forehead.

The Prefect reached to the wall, pulled a switch, and with a crisp click, a device overhead began to spin. A steady breeze flowed toward Hong Chengchou.

He jolted again.

"What is this now?"

"It is called an electric fan. Very comfortable."

"I have already noticed."

He circled the fan several times, fascinated. Then he leaned in close and allowed the wind to blast directly at his face for a good while. His hair fluttered wildly in the breeze.

Suddenly he stiffened.

Disaster.

His hairstyle.

He flashed to a nearby mirror. Indeed, the carefully arranged hair had been thrown into chaos.

This would not do.

In one fluid burst of speed that would shame most martial artists of the Jianghu, he appeared beside a courtyard water basin, dipped his small comb, restored his hair in an instant, and returned to his original position before the bookshelf as though he had never moved.

Total time spent, perhaps the blink of an eye.

His hair once again radiated elegance. His posture regained its composed dignity.

He calmly returned the book to its shelf.

"These volumes cannot startle this official," he declared serenely.

He drew a slow breath.

"I have completed my visit. This bookstore is... very interesting. Next, this official must continue to the capital to assume his post."

The Prefect nodded. "Since you are bound for the capital, you might consider taking the big train for part of the journey. From here it will swiftly carry you to Taiyuan. Beyond that, you must travel by your own arrangements."

Hong Chengchou had once ridden the small train. He had no objection to trying the big one. He was curious about the difference.

"Very well. Lead the way."

A short while later, he stood before the massive steam locomotive.

And just as years ago when he first beheld the small train, he was shaken once more.

The steam engine was nothing like a toy. It was majestic. Powerful. Weathered and imposing, exuding an aura that commanded admiration.

Hong Chengchou looked up at it, and for a rare moment, felt very small indeed.

Chapter 1235 Everyone Around Us Is One of Ours

When Hong Chengchou stepped onto the train, he could not help but sigh inwardly.

Back then, trains existed only within that tiny patch of land in Gao Family Village. A single mu and a third of miracle. And now the iron tracks had stretched all the way to Yan'an Prefecture.

Give it enough time, he thought, and it might truly spread across the whole realm.

Only after sitting down did his emotions settle slightly.

Then he asked the conductor about the route and discovered something unexpected.

The train would first head to Xi'an, and from there he would transfer toward Shanxi.

That was practically a horseshoe detour.

"There is no direct train from Yan'an to Taiyuan?" he asked the passenger beside him.

The man laughed. "They're building it. The direct Yan'an to Taiyuan line is under construction. Just started not long ago. No idea when it'll be done. For now, you'll have to endure the transfers. Go to Xi'an first. Then to Xi'an East Station. Transfer to the train bound for Luoyang Xiaolangdi. Get off halfway at a station called Longmen Ancient Ferry. Transfer again there. Only then can you catch the train to Taiyuan."

Complicated.

But Hong Chengchou was a scholar. A map of the Ming realm lived inside his mind. After a moment's thought, he understood.

The railways relied on major cities, forming a modest network.

All he needed to do was switch trains at the intersections.

No direct line, yes. But still countless times faster than a horse carriage.

After arriving in Xi'an, he did not enter the city. The train skirted around it and stopped at Xi'an East Station. There he boarded another train heading toward Luoyang.

Just as it was about to depart, a figure flashed past the carriage door.

A fair skinned, beardless, middle aged fat man stepped aboard. After presenting his ticket, he walked down the aisle and sat not far from Hong.

Hong felt the man looked familiar, as though he had seen him somewhere before. Yet he could not immediately recall where.

Before he could figure it out, the man recognized him first.

"Eh? Isn't this Lord Hong?"

"You recognize me? I seem to recognize you as well, yet I cannot place you."

"San Shier! Third Steward! Do you remember? The Tianzun Hotpot Festival!"

The moment "Hotpot Festival" was mentioned, Hong Chengchou's long buried memories sprang back to life and launched a direct assault.

That spicy, numbing hotpot. Thick with beef tallow. So fragrant it clung to one's robes for days, utterly destroying official dignity.

The greatest enemy of his life.

"You are the steward from the Li family who invited me to dine. Surname San."

Hong's memory was formidable. Give him a single clue and even events from years ago resurfaced clearly.

San Shier grinned. "Lord Hong truly has a remarkable memory. To remember such a small figure as me."

"You are no small figure," Hong replied calmly. "Chengcheng County. Gao Family Village. I have heard those names many times since."

When he served as Governor of Yansui suppressing bandits, the families of rebel troops he was unable to handle had been handed over to Chengcheng County for resettlement.

"A tiny county like Chengcheng could never have managed so many displaced bandits on its own. It must have been your Li family who pacified them."

Hong continued, "Later I heard that Huanglong Mountain was filled with resettlement camps. The former bandits were arranged to reclaim wasteland and labor. Your Li family has rendered great merit for Shaanxi's peace."

San Shier merely smiled, tacitly accepting the praise.

"Along this journey," Hong added, "Yan'an and Xi'an are prosperous beyond imagination. That was your doing as well?"

"I only handled some trivial matters," San Shier replied modestly. "The real credit belongs to Dao Xuan Tianzun's grace, and to the common people striving upward themselves."

Hong let out a quiet sigh.

"Back then, you once asked me how to govern bandits. I pondered long and hard and concluded there was only one word. Kill."

He paused.

"But now, seeing Shaanxi like this, I have a different proposal. If the entire realm were as prosperous as Shaanxi, there would be no need to kill at all. Everyone could simply be fed."

San Shier smiled. "Lord Hong speaks wisely. These days, when we deal with bandits, we do not kill them. We capture them and put them to work. Railway construction never complains about too many laborers. Only too few."

By now, the train had begun moving, the wheels clattering rhythmically.

Ka-chi. Ka-chi.

On San Shier's chest, the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly opened its eyes.

Using the train's noise as cover, a low voice spoke.

"This time, Hong Chengchou is heading to the capital to assume the post of Minister of War."

San Shier lowered his voice instantly. "Ah. Tianzun has arrived. What instructions do you have?"

In the modern world above, Li Dao Xuan pondered.

Historically, Hong Chengchou entered the capital to deal with the Jurchens. Later came the Song Jin Campaign. He was captured, coerced, tempted, cornered. With no way out, he surrendered and became a traitor.

But after the Jurchens were heavily battered at Pi Island, would the Song Jin Campaign even occur?

Hard to say.

Most likely, Hong would not follow the same path this time.

Even so, better safe than sorry.

Many science fiction stories spoke of historical convergence. If one forcibly altered history, history itself might exert a powerful pull to guide events back to their original course.

Even if the Qing entry into the Pass never happened.

Even if the Song Jin Campaign vanished.

Some trivial butterfly wing, some minor accident, might still nudge Hong Chengchou toward his recorded fate.

That possibility could not be ignored.

One could not simply watch a capable man turn into a traitor.

There were two solutions.

First, kill him on the spot.

Second, prevent him from entering the capital.

Li Dao Xuan was not a bloodthirsty man. The first option was rejected immediately.

That left only the second.

"San Shier," he whispered, "stop Hong Chengchou from entering the capital. Use any feasible method. Keep him within the liberated region. He must not be allowed to go to Beijing."

San Shier blinked. "Ah?"

After a brief pause, he asked, "Tianzun, why not simply reach down and grab him? Would that not solve everything?"

"That is the final option."

San Shier understood at once.

Dao Xuan Tianzun always treated mortals with care. Unless someone was truly wicked, he would not casually frighten them with divine means.

And at present, Hong Chengchou had shown no signs of treachery.

So divine intervention was off the table.

They would have to use mortal methods.

San Shier turned back toward Hong Chengchou, a peculiar smile forming on his face.

"Lord Hong, this trip to the capital. You are being promoted to Minister?"

Hong nodded. "I am about to assume the post of Minister of War."

"Congratulations," San Shier said warmly. "But that seat is not an easy one to occupy."

Hong naturally understood.

He leaned back and gazed at the scenery rushing past outside the window.

"To serve the sovereign is to lie beside a tiger," he said quietly. "Especially in this dynasty. Grand Secretaries are replaced as swiftly as lanterns spinning in a festival."

He let out a long breath.

"This journey to the capital. I truly do not know whether it will bring fortune or disaster."

Chapter 1236 Malfunction

After leaving Xi'an, the train headed toward Gao Family Village proper.

This stretch of railway, the Xi'an–Luoyang line, ran entirely through the core of Dao Xuan Tianzun's liberated region. Every mile of it passed through areas that had developed at astonishing speed.

On both sides of the tracks lay farmland treated with chemical fertilizer, planted using scientific methods. The crops stood tall and vigorous, so lush they brought joy at a single glance.

Hong Chengchou watched the flourishing fields of Shaanxi and felt genuine satisfaction rise in his chest.

The train also passed numerous factories. At the gate of the Chang'an Factory there was even a dedicated station, simply named Chang'an Factory Station. Along the way they rolled past coal mines, iron mines, steelworks, pig farms, chemical plants, cement factories, paper mills, textile mills.

The sight left him dazzled.

In just a few years stationed at the frontier, he had nearly missed an entire world transforming itself.

What he did not know was that beside him, San Shier had been scheming the whole way, trying to figure out how to keep Hong Chengchou inside the liberated region and prevent him from leaving.

San Shier had thought for five full stations and still could not come up with a proper solution. Hong carried an imperial order to enter the capital. Even if some minor incident delayed him, it would at most slow his journey. It would never make him abandon it entirely.

Troublesome.

Just as San Shier was pondering wild possibilities, the train stopped at Dali Station.

It was a small station, with few passengers boarding or alighting.

But among those boarding, San Shier spotted three familiar faces.

Or rather, three familiar former labor camp inmates.

Ji San'er. Wang Hu. Little Red Wolf.

The three had been sent to Huanglong Mountain's labor reform camp in the third year of Chongzhen, after being defeated by Hong Chengchou and escorted there by He Renlong. After several years of good behavior, they were released early in the seventh year of Chongzhen. They were now proud members of the working class.

San Shier's eyes lit up.

An idea struck instantly.

He rose at once and headed toward the train door.

The three had just boarded when they saw someone blocking the aisle. Looking closely, they nearly jumped out of their skins.

It was San Shier, the top administrative official of Gao Family Village.

They hurriedly bowed.

San Shier glanced toward Hong Chengchou's carriage. The man was not paying attention. Lowering his voice, San Shier said, "Come with me."

Seeing his mysterious expression, they knew something was up and followed him into another carriage.

Only then did San Shier speak in a whisper. "If I remember correctly, the three of you were defeated by Hong Chengchou in the third year of Chongzhen and escorted to Huanglong Mountain by He Renlong. Correct?"

Ji San'er nodded quickly. "Third Steward has a good memory. That is indeed how we arrived. We labored four years at Huanglong Mountain. Because of good behavior, we had our sentences reduced. Now the three of us work in the security department of the Dali Fertilizer Factory."

"Good. Very good." San Shier smiled. "How is life now?"

The three grinned. "We are very happy."

San Shier's expression suddenly turned stern.

"In the carriage ahead sits an old acquaintance of yours."

The three blinked. "Who?"

"Hong Chengchou."

The name landed like a stone.

Their expressions froze for a split second.

Hong Chengchou had once been their nightmare.

Back then he had crushed them utterly, beating them down so completely they could not even fight back. After defeating them, he had nearly executed them. Among court officials, he had been one of the most ruthless toward surrendered bandits. He understood too well that rebels who surrendered could easily rebel again. His solution had always been simple. Kill.

Only because Gao Family Village had extended an olive branch and offered to take in surrendered bandits had he lowered his blade and allowed He Renlong to transfer them instead of slaughtering them.

The awkwardness passed quickly.

Ji San'er straightened. "We have already turned over a new leaf. Even if Hong Chengchou stands before us now, we would not seek revenge."

"Not revenge," Wang Hu added firmly.

"Let the past stay in the past," said Xie Lang.

San Shier gave a sly grin. "How can we just let it go like that? The three of you should go take revenge. Capture him. Lock him in a cave somewhere."

All three recoiled. "Third Steward, what are you saying?"

They thought this was some moral test.

They shook their heads vigorously. "That would be wrong. We will not do evil again."

"This time it is not evil," San Shier said calmly. "It is a good deed. Dao Xuan Tianzun personally issued a decree. No matter what means are used, Hong Chengchou must be kept within our territory."

"Tianzun's decree?" The three straightened instantly.

San Shier nodded. "Tianzun seems to have glimpsed certain heavenly secrets. He has determined that Hong Chengchou must not enter the capital, or undesirable consequences may follow. I cannot think of a proper excuse to detain him. Then I happened to see the three of you. Since there is old enmity between you, you might as well use that as pretext."

The three broke into delighted smiles.

"Revenge is unimportant," Ji San'er said. "To serve Tianzun is our honor."

They peeked toward the front carriage.

Hong Chengchou was gazing out the window. In the same carriage sat many of his household troops.

Those troops were no joke. All elites. Formidable fighters. Back in the day Hong had swept across Shaanxi largely because of them.

Ji San'er frowned. "Third Steward, just the three of us cannot overcome his guards."

San Shier chuckled. "He is on our territory. Surrounded by our people. You are acting under Tianzun's decree. Every resource here is at your disposal. Is it truly difficult to deal with a few guards? Use your brains."

The three had once roamed Jianghu. Cunning tricks were second nature.

After a moment's thought, their eyes lit up.

"We understand. There is a plan."

There were still ten minutes before departure.

The three leapt off the train in a hurry. Ten minutes later, just as the train was about to leave, they jumped back on, grins plastered across their faces.

The train had barely started moving when Ji San'er found the conductor. He slipped him a large packet of knockout powder and whispered at length into his ear.

The conductor lowered his voice. "If this truly is Tianzun's decree, I will of course cooperate fully. But do not falsely claim his name."

Ji San'er tapped the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest. "Would I dare?"

The conductor laughed. "Fair enough."

He sprang into action, moving carriage by carriage, whispering to each passenger in turn.

Before long, everyone on the train knew.

"Tianzun's decree. Unconditional cooperation."

Chapter 1237 This Is the Prince of Qin's Residence

The train screeched.

"Whir! Screech! Screech!"

Steel ground against steel as the iron beast slowed from a mad sprint to a reluctant crawl, then finally came to a stop in the middle of nowhere.

No village ahead. No inn behind. No farmland. No factory. Just endless yellow loess stretching out on both sides of the railway like the skin of a dried earth dragon.

Inside the carriage, Hong Chengchou frowned.

"What is this?"

Across from him, San Shier sprang to his feet in one smooth motion.

"Conductor! Conductor! What happened?"

The conductor came running down the aisle, waving his hands.

"Dear passengers, please remain calm. The train has encountered a minor malfunction. We are troubleshooting and will begin emergency repairs immediately."

That was the wrong thing to say.

A burly man shot up from his seat.

"Are you kidding me? My eighty-year-old mother is dying. I'm rushing back to see her one last time. If I miss it because of your broken scrap heap, will you take responsibility?"

"My wife is in labor!"

"I have a contract to sign today!"

Within seconds, the carriage turned into a marketplace riot. At least a dozen people in Hong Chengchou's section alone began shouting.

Hong Chengchou merely tightened his brow.

He was not in such a hurry. Yes, he carried an imperial mandate and must enter the capital. But in the old days, horses were slow and roads slower. Traveling from Ningxia to the capital could take months. No one panicked over that.

If necessary, he could simply disembark and continue on foot. He had never intended to rely entirely on this Great Iron Train anyway.

The conductor raised both hands.

"Please don't be angry. We will refund everyone's tickets."

And to everyone's astonishment, he actually began refunding them on the spot.

At the same time, two more conductors pushed a small cart into the carriage. On it stood rows of porcelain bottles, neatly arranged. Each bottle bore three bold characters.

Tianfu Cola.

The conductor announced brightly, "Due to the inconvenience, not only will we refund your tickets, but each passenger will receive a complimentary bottle of a heavenly beverage bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Everyone gets one."

He began distributing the bottles.

Hong Chengchou stared at the porcelain container in his hand.

What strange object is this?

Caution had kept him alive through countless political storms. He did not drink random liquids handed to him in open country.

Yet around him, no one hesitated.

A passenger uncorked his bottle, took a huge gulp, then burped loudly.

"Refreshing! Fine, since you've given us Tianfu Cola, I won't make a fuss. Fix the train slowly. I'll wait."

San Shier accepted his bottle, took a sip, and grinned.

"Lord Hong, this is truly nectar from the heavens. Will you not try?"

Hong Chengchou scanned the carriage. Every single person was drinking. No fear. No suspicion.

Perhaps I am being overly cautious.

He glanced at one of his household guards.

The guard understood immediately. He opened the bottle, took a tentative sip, then his eyes lit up.

"Master, it is delicious. Not wine. It will not intoxicate you."

"Very well."

Hong Chengchou raised the bottle and took a careful mouthful.

A cold, fizzing surge rushed across his tongue and down his throat. It spread through his limbs like cheerful lightning.

"Hm. Quite good."

Soon the entire carriage was drinking Tianfu Cola. Not a soul looked wary.

One bottle per person. Even the two hundred household soldiers under Hong Chengchou's command each received one.

They all drank.

After some time, a passenger asked, "How long until repairs are complete?"

The conductor gave an awkward smile. "In the short term... I'm afraid..."

The man snorted. "Forget it. You refunded my ticket anyway. I'll walk along the tracks to the next station."

Passengers split into two factions. Some stayed on the train to wait. Others disembarked and began walking east along the railway.

Hong Chengchou considered briefly.

"We will walk as well."

He stepped off the train. From several carriages behind him, his household soldiers poured out, forming a protective ring of two hundred men as they advanced along the tracks.

Other passengers walked nearby, muttering complaints.

Something feels... off.

If only his group had been forced off the train, he would have immediately suspected conspiracy. But commoners had been affected too. Many were walking beside him.

Surely no one would harm so many civilians just to target him?

As that thought formed, unease deepened.

After walking for a while, blood circulation quickened.

Then his head began to spin.

Hong Chengchou's heart lurched.

"The drink... something was wrong with the drink?"

He glanced around. Several passengers staggered. One collapsed with a dull thud. Others swayed, eyes unfocused, the world clearly tilting around them.

He looked at his soldiers.

One by one, they stumbled, their steps unsteady.

"Damn it. The Tianfu Cola... it was drugged..."

At that moment, three passengers ahead stopped walking.

They turned around.

Their faces broke into arrogant grins.

"Hong Chengchou. Take a good look at who we are."

He forced his blurred vision to focus.

His pupils shrank.

"Ji San'er. Wang Hu. Xie Lang!"

The three burst into laughter.

"That's right. The very same. Back then you bullied the three of us mercilessly. Now it's our turn to repay the blood debt."

Hong Chengchou trembled with fury.

"You bandits... you vile..."

His guards struggled to stand in front of him, even as their knees buckled.

With the last of his strength, Hong Chengchou demanded, "You sabotaged the train... poisoned all the passengers... just for me?"

Ji San'er threw his head back and laughed.

"Exactly. We deliberately broke the train and mixed knockout powder into the Tianfu Cola. No matter how cautious you are, Hong Chengchou, you cannot defend against indiscriminate mass poisoning. Hahaha!"

"Madmen... utterly depraved..."

Ji San'er grinned.

"Fall."

Wang Hu echoed, "Fall."

Xie Lang added cheerfully, "Down you go."

The sky spun. The earth tilted.

Hong Chengchou crashed to the ground.

Around him, his two hundred loyal household soldiers collapsed in succession.

The last thing they saw was Ji San'er stepping forward, hoisting Hong Chengchou onto his shoulder.

Then darkness swallowed everything.

—

Who knew how much time passed.

The household soldiers slowly regained consciousness.

They lay scattered on the ground. Some passengers nearby were still unconscious. Others had just woken, sitting up and staring blankly around, unable to comprehend where they were.

The guards scrambled upright.

"Master!"

They searched frantically.

But it was obvious.

Hong Chengchou was gone.

Ji San'er and his two accomplices had successfully abducted him.

Chapter 1238 Aren't You Afraid an External Enemy Will Pluck the Peach?

"The Master is gone!"

"Find him!"

"Xiao Liu, you run the fastest. Go to the capital. Inform His Majesty that something happened on the road. Ask for a delay."

"The rest of you, search!"

The servants scattered in panic. Dust rose from the road as they ran in different directions. Their voices faded into the distance until only the silent train and the unconscious passengers remained.

For several breaths, nothing moved.

Then a man near the window twitched.

Another passenger coughed.

One by one, the bodies that had been sprawled across the carriage floor slowly sat up.

A moment later, laughter burst out.

"That was excellent."

"I really drank the knockout powder."

"My head is still spinning."

"So this is how actors feel."

"Chen Qianhu makes it look easy."

"Serving Tianzun is worth a little dizziness."

The atmosphere transformed instantly. The lifeless scene became lively and bright. People helped each other up. Some stretched their arms. Some rubbed their temples. Their bodies were weak but their spirits were high.

In the distance came the heavy mechanical rhythm of iron wheels turning on rail.

The locomotive that had been declared broken began to move again. Steam rose from its chimney. The machine approached steadily as if nothing unusual had occurred.

San Shier stood at the door of one carriage. He had just fully recovered from the effects of the powder. His face was pale but his expression cheerful.

"Everyone worked hard."

"It was fun."

"I did not know fainting could be so interesting."

"Do you think I can become an actor now."

"The train is late. Let us board."

The passengers returned to their seats. Laughter lingered in the air. Soon the train resumed its journey, carrying with it no visible trace of conspiracy.

Far away from the tracks, in a quiet stone residence hidden behind walls and garden paths, Hong Chengchou slowly opened his eyes.

He lay on a wooden bed. The room was small but orderly. A table stood near the window. A chair was positioned beside it. A wardrobe rested against the wall. A bronze mirror hung neatly in one corner.

There were no chains on his wrists.

No iron bars.

No guards standing over him.

This was not a dungeon.

Hong Chengchou sat up calmly. He had faced defeat on battlefields. He had endured political storms in the capital. Panic had long ago been trained out of him.

He considered the situation.

He had been drugged. That much was clear. The attack had been clean and efficient. Whoever orchestrated it possessed discipline and planning.

If they knew he had recently assumed the post of Minister of War, they would not dare to kill him casually.

If they believed he was still Governor General of the Three Borders, he was still too valuable.

He was leverage.

Leverage meant negotiation.

Negotiation meant survival.

His eyes shifted to the bronze mirror.

He rose and approached it.

His hair was slightly disordered. His robe had faint wrinkles. There was dust on the back of his sleeve.

That would not do.

At that exact moment, the door opened.

Hong Chengchou did not turn immediately. His hand moved with astonishing precision. He lifted a comb from the table. With one smooth motion he straightened his hair. With another he flattened the creases in his robe. With a final sweep he brushed away the dust.

Then he turned and seated himself at the table with composed dignity.

By the time the visitors fully entered the room, Hong Chengchou appeared as though he had been calmly waiting there all along.

Ji San'er stepped inside first. Wang Hu followed. Xie Lang entered last.

For a brief instant, they felt they had glimpsed Hong standing before the mirror. Yet now he sat perfectly upright, expression serene.

Ji San'er narrowed his eyes.

"Hong Chengchou. Do you know why we brought you here."

Hong's voice was steady.

"You want something."

Ji San'er smiled faintly.

"You did not kill us when you captured us before."

Hong Chengchou replied evenly.

"I regret that mercy now."

Wang Hu crossed his arms.

"We are not here for revenge."

Hong Chengchou studied them carefully. Their expressions held no rage. No bloodlust. That unsettled him more than open hostility.

"Then state your purpose."

Ji San'er spoke plainly.

"We want you to stay here."

Hong Chengchou's gaze sharpened.

"You sabotaged a locomotive. You drugged an entire train. All to confine one official."

"Yes."

"You believe this is righteous."

"We believe this is necessary."

Silence filled the room.

Hong Chengchou stood slowly. He walked to the door, expecting resistance. He pushed it gently.

It opened.

He stepped outside.

Beyond the doorway lay a modest garden. Stone paths wound between trimmed shrubs. A pavilion stood beside a small pond. Around the garden was a ring of identical stone houses.

This was not a prison complex.

It looked like a secluded estate.

A door across the courtyard opened.

A man stepped out and froze.

"Minister Hong."

Hong Chengchou turned.

The face stirred faint recognition.

"Who are you."

"Mi Qingli. Captain Mi of the Embroidered Uniform Guard."

Hong's memory clicked into place.

"You were stationed in Shaanxi."

"Yes."

Mi Qingli rushed forward, grasping Hong's hands with desperate urgency.

"Have you come to rescue us."

Hong frowned.

"Rescue you."

Mi Qingli's face drained of color.

"You were captured as well."

Hong's silence answered him.

Mi Qingli staggered back.

"It is over. The rebels have lost all restraint. They dare imprison the Governor General. Even the Minister of War."

Hong's voice lowered.

"Where are we."

Mi Qingli swallowed.

"The rear garden of the Qin Prince's residence."

Hong Chengchou's composure cracked for the first time.

"The Qin Prince's residence."

The implications were staggering.

The Qin Prince was a royal member of the imperial clan. His residence should have been heavily guarded, loyal to the throne. For rebels to operate here meant either infiltration of extraordinary scale or tacit cooperation from within.

Hong Chengchou's mind began calculating at terrifying speed.

If this was the Qin Prince's estate, then the captors possessed influence far beyond banditry. This was not a simple kidnapping. This was controlled detention inside political territory.

He turned back toward Ji San'er.

"You risk much."

Ji San'er shook his head.

"No."

"Do you think the court will tolerate this."

"The court does not yet know."

Hong Chengchou's eyes flashed.

"My servants will report."

Ji San'er's expression remained calm.

"Report what."

Hong understood instantly.

A staged train malfunction.

A missing official on a chaotic road.

Confusion.

Delay.

Time.

Everything had been arranged to create fog rather than outrage.

Hong folded his hands behind his back and began walking slowly along the stone path. Mi Qingli followed close behind, whispering anxiously.

"There are others here."

"How many."

"More than twenty officials. Some minor. Some important."

"All confined like this."

"Yes. Comfortable. Not harmed."

Hong stopped beside the pond.

"You realize what you are doing."

Ji San'er answered without hesitation.

"Yes."

"You remove senior commanders during unstable times."

"Yes."

"Do you not fear that external enemies will take advantage."

Wang Hu's eyes sharpened.

"That depends."

"On what."

"On whether the external enemies still believe the Ming is weak."

Hong Chengchou turned fully toward them.

"What are you implying."

Xie Lang finally spoke, his tone calm but firm.

"The border is quieter than you think."

Hong studied him carefully. Xie Lang carried himself differently from an ordinary outlaw. There was discipline in his posture. Restraint in his gaze.

"You assume too much."

Ji San'er replied.

"No. We calculate."

Hong considered the greater board.

If multiple officials were quietly removed and isolated, policy paralysis could occur. Command chains might stall. Orders could be delayed.

Yet if those orders had been misguided in the first place, paralysis might prevent catastrophe.

The thought irritated him.

"You believe you are correcting the state."

Ji San'er answered simply.

"Yes."

"And you think confining me helps."

"Yes."

"Explain."

Ji San'er looked directly at him.

"You push for aggressive consolidation in the west."

Hong did not deny it.

"You strengthen military taxation."

"Yes."

"You centralize frontier command."

"Yes."

"You prepare for decisive campaigns."

"Yes."

Ji San'er's gaze remained steady.

"And you underestimate the internal fracture."

Hong's expression hardened.

"You speak like a court critic."

"We were prisoners once."

Silence lingered.

Hong understood the subtext. These men had undergone reform under Tianzun's influence. Their worldview had shifted. They were no longer simple rebels. They operated under ideology.

"You confine me to change my thinking."

"Yes."

"You expect me to emerge grateful."

"No."

"What then."

"We expect you to understand."

The wind stirred the surface of the pond. Ripples spread outward in widening circles.

Hong Chengchou felt the unfamiliar sensation of being studied rather than threatened.

No torture.

No ransom demand.

No insults.

Just containment.

A strategic pause imposed upon a strategist.

"You believe history will justify you."

Ji San'er answered softly.

"We believe stability requires interruption."

Hong's lips curved faintly.

"Interruption invites chaos."

"Unchecked ambition invites collapse."

Their eyes locked.

For the first time, Hong sensed that this was not a battlefield contest of swords or cannons. It was a contest of timelines. Of visions for the empire's survival.

He inhaled slowly.

"If you miscalculate, foreign powers will not wait politely."

Wang Hu replied.

"They are already calculating."

"And you think they will hesitate."

"They hesitate when they see unity."

Hong's gaze sharpened.

"You presume unity."

Ji San'er nodded.

"We are building it."

Hong said nothing for a long moment.

He looked at the identical stone houses.

Comfortable detention.

Isolated influence.

Controlled environment.

This was not imprisonment out of fear.

It was suspension out of intent.

He finally spoke.

"How long."

Ji San'er answered calmly.

"As long as necessary."

Hong Chengchou folded his sleeves.

"Then we shall see whose calculation proves correct."

Ji San'er inclined his head slightly.

"We shall."

The garden fell quiet once more.

Beyond its walls, the empire continued moving. Armies marched. Courtiers debated. Merchants traded. Enemies watched.

And at the center of a carefully constructed stillness, a Minister of War began to realize that sometimes the most dangerous battlefield was not the frontier.

It was the pause between decisions.

Far away, the train carrying San Shier disappeared into the horizon.

The play had ended.

The true contest had only begun.

Chapter 1239 The Mongol Heavenly Khan Is Swimming

The three words Qin Prince Residence struck Hong Chengchou harder than any battlefield cannon.

For a brief instant, terrifying phrases flashed through his mind.

Royal rebellion.

Prince uprising.

Civil war.

The Jingnan precedent.

These were not minor disturbances. These were events that shook dynasties to their core.

Even a man as composed as Hong Chengchou felt a thin layer of cold sweat form on his forehead.

Then, almost immediately, he remembered Mi Qingli was standing in front of him.

A Minister of War sweating in panic would not look dignified.

That would not do.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hong noticed a small ornamental pond in the garden.

His body shifted.

In a blink, he was at the pond's edge.

In another blink, a handkerchief dipped into cool water.

In a final blink, the moisture was wiped clean from his brow.

He returned to Mi Qingli's side as though he had never moved.

Mi Qingli blinked.

For a moment he thought he had seen Hong rush away in agitation.

Now the Minister stood serene again.

Perhaps it had been his imagination.

Hong's voice was low and controlled.

"You are telling me that the Qin Prince is rebelling. That he is secretly detaining court officials. That you and I were both seized for this reason."

Mi Qingli nodded vigorously.

"Yes."

Hong continued.

"And he has colluded with former bandits to do so."

Mi Qingli's eyes widened.

"That makes sense. The bandits who once ravaged Sichuan and the Central Plains were crushed by this faction. They captured many bandit leaders. They claimed it was reform through labor. In truth they must have absorbed them as enforcers."

Hong's expression darkened.

"This is extremely dangerous."

Mi Qingli lowered his voice further.

"That is not the strangest part."

"What else."

"I witnessed something myself."

"Speak."

"They have divine assistance. A deity cast down an enormous chicken wing from the heavens. I tasted it. It was delicious."

Silence followed.

Hong Chengchou stared at him.

If not for the absurd final sentence, Mi Qingli's report would have sounded grave and coherent.

Now it bordered on lunacy.

Hong slowly turned his gaze away.

Perhaps the prolonged detention had damaged the man's mind.

Before he could respond, footsteps entered the garden.

A group of men walked in carrying trays filled with food.

It was evening.

Hong suddenly realized how hungry he was. The anesthetic must have kept him unconscious for many hours. His stomach felt hollow.

One of the men delivering the trays wore the uniform of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

He smiled brightly.

"Captain Mi. Minister Hong. Tonight's meal is excellent. Tianzun has bestowed a rare delicacy from the heavens. It is called Wang Zhong Wang sausage."

Hong blinked.

Mi Qingli lit up.

"That is my favorite."

He rushed forward and took a tray.

From the surrounding houses, more than twenty men emerged. They were Mi Qingli's subordinates, all detained here. They gathered around the stone tables in the garden and began distributing the dishes.

Hong took a tray as well and sat across from Mi Qingli.

Curiously, the man who delivered the food also sat down. He bowed politely toward Hong.

"Minister Hong. I am responsible for the Xi'an sector of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. My surname is Tie. You may call me Captain Tie."

Hong's eyes narrowed.

"Xi'an."

"Yes."

"So we are in Xi'an."

"You are currently a guest in the rear garden of the Qin Prince Residence in Xi'an."

Hong processed this calmly.

Mi Qingli had not been delirious.

He lifted a small cube of sausage with his chopsticks and placed it in his mouth. The taste was unlike anything he had experienced before. Savory. Rich. Strangely refined.

He chewed slowly.

"Captain Tie. Based on what I observe, the Qin Prince Residence is engaged in treason. Ministerial officials have been detained. You admit participation."

"Yes."

The admission was immediate.

Hong felt a flicker of irritation. Such openness bordered on mockery.

"You dare openly imprison the Minister of War. Your confidence suggests significant military strength. How many troops do you command."

Captain Tie shook his head.

"With Tianzun's protection, troop numbers are secondary. We do not prioritize numbers. We prioritize whether the people can pass through national transformation without suffering from war."

Hong's brows furrowed.

"National transformation. Bold words."

"You traveled from Ningxia. You passed through Yan'an. You boarded a train. Did you not observe change along the way?"

That sentence struck Hong more deeply than any accusation.

He had indeed noticed changes.

Infrastructure improvements.

Disciplined local governance.

Unusual prosperity in certain regions.

He had not allowed himself to dwell on it.

Hong replied evenly.

"Is this the appropriate time for transformation. The Jurchens watch from the northeast. The Mongols raid the grasslands. Bandit remnants still lurk. Severe drought has left the people struggling. Western pirates harass the southeastern coast. If you choose this moment to rebel, you risk creating chaos that benefits only our enemies."

Captain Tie exhaled slowly.

"Tianzun revealed fragments of heavenly secrets. If transformation does not occur now, the realm will eventually fall into Jurchen hands. They will mismanage it. The nation will grow weak and poor. Centuries later, our people may even be labeled sick men. We cannot allow that path."

Hong remained silent.

Captain Tie continued.

"For Tianzun, it does not matter whose surname rules the throne. He is a celestial being. Mortal emperors do not affect him. What matters is whether the common people eat enough. Whether they avoid dying in wars. Whether our civilization endures for hundreds or thousands of years."

Hong wanted to dismiss this as madness.

Yet he knew the strength of the Jurchens. He knew the fragility of the court's finances. He knew reform was overdue.

He spoke carefully.

"Even if your prophecy holds truth, launching rebellion now invites disaster. Are you not afraid that bandits or the Jurchens will invade and seize the advantage. You would become eternal sinners."

Captain Tie smiled faintly.

"That is why we first subdued the Mongols."

Hong paused.

"Subdued."

"Yes."

"Then eliminated the major bandit threats."

"Yes."

"Next you plan to defeat the Jurchens."

"Yes."

"And only when external enemies are gone will you proceed further."

"That is correct."

Hong allowed himself a thin smile.

"Speaking is easy."

Captain Tie leaned forward slightly.

"Minister Hong. How long has it been since Mongol forces raided the Three Borders under your command."

The question struck like a hidden arrow.

Hong's mind raced.

The frequency of raids had indeed declined.

Supply caravans had reported unusual calm on certain routes.

Scouts had noted reduced activity among certain tribes.

He had attributed it to seasonal factors.

Or coincidence.

Or temporary weakness among the steppe confederations.

Captain Tie continued softly.

"The Mongol Heavenly Khan is currently swimming."

Hong blinked.

"Swimming."

"Yes."

"In what sense."

"In a heated pool."

Silence enveloped the table.

Mi Qingli leaned closer, whispering excitedly.

"I saw it myself. The Heavenly Khan enjoys modern bath facilities. He eats imported sausages. He signs trade agreements."

Hong stared at Captain Tie.

"You are claiming you have pacified the Mongols through luxury."

"Through leverage."

"You control their leadership."

"We influence their stability."

Hong placed his chopsticks down.

"If the Mongols are neutralized, it would explain the calm on the frontier."

Captain Tie nodded.

"The grasslands are quieter than reports suggest."

Hong's thoughts shifted rapidly.

If the Mongols were indeed contained.

If bandit leaders had been reformed rather than annihilated.

If infrastructure was expanding.

If financial reforms were underway quietly.

Then what appeared as rebellion might instead be staged consolidation.

He spoke slowly.

"You isolate key officials to prevent interference."

"Yes."

"You buy time."

"Yes."

"You aim to restructure without triggering total war."

"Yes."

Hong studied the faces around him.

These were not frenzied revolutionaries.

They were organized.

Disciplined.

Confident.

"Do you truly believe you can defeat the Jurchens."

Captain Tie's answer was calm.

"They are strong cavalry. We are building stronger industry."

Hong did not laugh.

Industry.

Firearms.

Rail transport.

Supply chains.

These were advantages that frontier warfare had long lacked.

He folded his hands.

"If you fail, history will curse you."

"If we do nothing, history will erase us."

The garden grew quiet.

The detained officials continued eating around them, their conversation subdued but not desperate.

They were not chained.

They were not tortured.

They were paused.

Hong finally spoke.

"You are gambling the empire."

Captain Tie replied.

"No. We are hedging it."

Hong allowed a faint sigh.

"And what of me."

"You are part of the calculation."

"You expect me to cooperate."

"We expect you to observe."

"And if I refuse."

"You are free to argue."

Hong looked around once more.

The Qin Prince Residence.

Xi'an.

A garden prison that felt more like a controlled symposium.

Beyond these walls, armies maneuvered. Diplomacy shifted. Enemies evaluated weakness.

Or strength.

Hong Chengchou leaned back slightly.

"You claim the Mongol Heavenly Khan is swimming."

"Yes."

"Then I would like proof."

Captain Tie smiled.

"You will have it."

The night air cooled. Lanterns flickered to life around the garden. The scent of unfamiliar sausage lingered.

In the distance, unseen beyond stone walls, the future of the Great Ming turned quietly on unseen gears.

And somewhere far to the north, in water warmer than any steppe river, a khan adjusted to a world he did not fully understand.

The transformation had already begun.

Chapter 1240 The Minister of War Is Not Present

Hong Chengchou's mind began to turn at high speed.

The jurisdiction of the Governor General of the Three Border Regions covered Yansui, Ningxia, and Gansu. For years those lands had suffered constant harassment from the Mongols. Raids had come like seasonal storms. Border forts were never at peace. Supplies were always strained. Soldiers lived with armor at their bedside.

Yet in recent years the Mongol incursions had gradually stopped.

When had that begun.

A name surfaced in his memory.

His brows drew together.

"Shi Jian. Is Shi Jian one of yours?"

Tie Baihu answered without hesitation.

"Yes. General Shi Jian was sent by us to solve the Mongol problem. The harassment you fear has already been dealt with."

Hong Chengchou felt genuine shock. It rose from his chest like cold water. But his face did not change. His posture remained composed. His voice steady.

"Shi Jian merely intimidated them. He frightened the Mongols into staying quiet. But if your rebellion spreads and the realm falls into chaos, the Mongols will return. They always return when the Central Plains weaken."

Tie Baihu smiled faintly.

"Will they."

Before the exchange could continue, Mi Qianhu set down his food bowl with a sharp sound and wiped his mouth.

"Enough. Tie me up. It is time to go watch Gao Family News."

Hong Chengchou turned his head.

"What news."

Mi Qianhu answered with complete seriousness.

"Gao Family News. Every day they broadcast events great and small. State affairs. Local affairs. Strange affairs. Trivial affairs. It is the only entertainment I have here. If I miss it, I feel as though I might die."

Hong Chengchou was silent.

Tie Baihu looked at Mi Qianhu.

"You do not need to be tied. You witnessed the Heavenly Venerable granting the giant chicken wing. Do you still think of escape."

Mi Qianhu lowered his gaze and remained quiet for a long moment.

"Better tie me. If I suddenly grow foolish and try to run, that would be troublesome. Bind me so I stop thinking about it."

Ropes were brought out. Mi Qianhu and his companions were tied securely.

When it was Hong Chengchou's turn, he spoke calmly.

"I do not require binding. I will not engage in futile struggles."

He was a civil official. His physical strength was limited. Tie Baihu saw no need to restrain him.

They left the Prince of Qin's residence.

Outside, Zhu Cunji sat waiting, clad in garments that shimmered under the sun. The gold thread in his robes caught the light so strongly it almost hurt the eyes.

Hong Chengchou glanced at him. Words rose to his throat, then fell away. He had already spoken enough to Tie Baihu. He felt no desire to repeat himself.

He walked in silence.

Soon they reached the marketplace at Caishikou.

A vast crowd had already gathered. People filled the square. Merchants closed stalls early. Laborers washed quickly and hurried over. Even elderly men leaned on canes to secure a place.

They were waiting for the news.

Hong Chengchou felt unease in his chest.

These so called rebels possessed the hearts of the people.

The television lit up.

Advertisements began.

Colorful images flickered one after another. Voices praised products with relentless enthusiasm. Medicines. Farming tools. Cloth. Kitchenware. Prepared foods. New mechanical devices. Each segment was brief yet persuasive.

Hong Chengchou found himself calculating.

In ten minutes he had noted at least fifteen items he wished to purchase. When he tallied the cost in his mind, the total exceeded one hundred taels of silver.

His heart jumped.

This strange luminous mirror drained wealth like a flowing river.

He overheard the Princess Consort of the Prince of Qin speaking rapidly to a eunuch beside her.

"Write that down. Buy one later and test it."

"This item looks excellent. I want it on my table tomorrow evening."

"Within half an hour I must eat that rabbit brand spiced rabbit head."

Hong Chengchou could not help but compute her spending as well. In just those few minutes she had casually committed more than three hundred taels.

Finally the advertisements ended.

He exhaled without realizing it.

If this continued, even his family estate would not withstand it. The Qin household might afford such indulgence. He could not.

The news began.

The first international segment reported on the progress of the Shimabara Rebellion in Japan. Military movements were explained clearly. Maps appeared. Casualty estimates were discussed. Hong Chengchou watched with keen interest.

Domestic reports followed.

Large bands of roving bandits had been crushed. Smaller groups were being eliminated region by region. Grain transport routes were reopening. Refugees were returning home.

The camera shifted to Shu.

A militia member from Sichuan stood before the lens. One foot rested upon the corpse of a local bandit. His face shone with excitement.

"The bandits of Wulong Mountain have been wiped out."

The surrounding villagers cheered loudly.

Hong Chengchou's expression grew complicated.

The camera changed again.

A man appeared with an awkward smile.

"My name is Zhang Xiaoyi. In the jianghu I was called the King of Great Gold. I once joined the rebel ranks. I accepted a false amnesty from Zuo Liangyu and served briefly as a fake garrison commander. I am now undergoing labor reform. Our camp is responsible for post disaster reconstruction in Wuyang County. Progress is smooth. Please look behind me."

The scene showed fields being cleared. Irrigation ditches repaired. Simple houses rebuilt.

Another shift.

Shanghai Port.

A senior official stood before the camera with visible pride. It was Lian Guoshi, Left Vice Minister of Revenue in Nanjing.

"Observe the prosperity of Shanghai Port. A few days ago the court officially lifted the maritime prohibition for Fujian and Shanghai. Previously we conducted sea trade in secret. Now we may do so openly."

Behind him the harbor teemed with activity. Ming ships. Japanese vessels. Korean ships. Portuguese carracks. Dutch merchantmen. Workers unloaded cargo. Others carried goods aboard departing vessels.

"In the past month alone," Lian Guoshi continued, "I have provided work for five hundred impoverished citizens as dock laborers. Five hundred households now have stable income. We shall continue expanding so more people may live better lives."

Hong Chengchou felt the ground beneath his convictions tremble.

The lens moved again.

Xue'er, manager of the Anqing Yingjiang Sericulture Cooperative, appeared before stacks of wide bamboo trays used for raising silkworms. She held a bolt of fine silk that shimmered softly.

"After several years of development, our cooperative has reached stable scale. We have recruited more than one thousand eight hundred female workers. Annual silk production has risen steadily. Village revenues have increased accordingly."

Her smile was confident.

Hong Chengchou watched segment after segment.

Everywhere economic growth.

Factories.

Cooperatives.

Ports.

Infrastructure.

The news did not focus on battles. It focused on livelihoods.

These rebels did not merely fight. They built.

A chill crept into him.

Without realizing it, had their influence spread across the entire realm.

The screen shifted to Zhoushan Maritime School.

A close shot captured the profile of a ten year old boy struggling in a swimming pool. He thrashed with determination, kicking hard, refusing to stop.

Beside the pool stood a female reporter.

"Please observe. The Great Khan of Mongolia, Ejei, is diligently practicing swimming. He strives to qualify as future commander of the Mongolian navy."

Hong Chengchou's composure cracked.

"What did you say."

The Mongol Great Khan.

In a swimming pool.

Training for a navy.

His mind could not reconcile the image. The Mongols had always been riders of the steppe. Masters of horse and bow. Now their sovereign trained in water like a southern fisherman.

The reporter continued cheerfully, explaining how cooperation between regions had fostered new ambitions. Maritime defense. Trade expansion. Education reform.

The crowd around Hong Chengchou reacted not with outrage, but with interest. Some laughed in surprise. Others nodded thoughtfully.

No one expressed fear.

No one spoke of betrayal.

Hong Chengchou felt isolated within the sea of spectators.

He had devoted his life to stabilizing border regions. He had negotiated, suppressed, calculated, endured. Yet here was a reality he had not foreseen.

If the Mongols became partners in maritime trade rather than raiders of the frontier, the entire strategic balance would shift.

The program continued.

Agricultural innovations in Henan.

Railway expansion near Xi'an.

A new printing workshop producing affordable textbooks.

Each report carried data. Numbers. Outcomes.

The format was consistent. Identify a problem. Present a solution. Display measurable results.

The crowd listened attentively.

When the segment ended, murmurs of discussion spread immediately. People debated which cooperative might recruit more workers. Which port offered better wages. Whether to send children to maritime school.

Hong Chengchou looked at Tie Baihu.

"Do you see this as harmless."

Tie Baihu answered quietly.

"This is what wins a nation."

Hong Chengchou did not reply.

He watched as the program concluded with a summary of grain prices across major markets. Stability was emphasized. Hoarding discouraged. Transparency promised.

The screen dimmed.

For a moment the square remained silent.

Then the crowd dispersed in orderly fashion. Conversations continued as they walked.

No chaos.

No riot.

No agitation.

Only discussion.

Hong Chengchou stood still.

He had believed rebellion meant burning cities and seizing granaries. Yet what he saw was systematic reconstruction.

He turned toward Zhu Cunji.

"You allow this."

Zhu Cunji met his gaze calmly.

"Can you stop it."

Hong Chengchou found no immediate answer.

The Minister of War was not present.

The army was not assembled.

Edicts could not silence what people had already witnessed with their own eyes.

Information had become a force.

As they began walking back, Hong Chengchou felt a subtle but undeniable shift within himself. Not surrender. Not agreement.

But doubt.

If governance could be demonstrated daily before common citizens, if prosperity could be measured publicly, then authority would no longer rest solely on titles or seals.

It would rest on results.

The thought unsettled him more than any battlefield report ever had.

